

Tom O'Donnell - Response to Government Study Committee Questions

1. The office of Moderator is defined and governed by the General Laws of the Commonwealth and the by-laws of the Town. In general, the Moderator's responsibility is to prepare for and conduct town meetings in a fair and effective manner and to appoint members of various town committees and boards as provided by town by-laws or town meeting votes.
2. The Moderator is accountable to the people of the Town and is elected annually at the Town election.
3.
 - Faithful adherence to fairness and openness in conducting and facilitating town meeting.
 - Making appointments of able and conscientious citizens of varied backgrounds to town committees and boards in a process that is open and actively encourages citizens to volunteer or recommend others.
 - Being generally available to consult with town officials or other citizens who may have questions or seek advice concerning town meeting procedures and traditions.
4. (a) I think it is a worth considering somewhat shorter time limits on speaking at town meeting than the 10 or 5 minutes we have had for many decades. Changes in communications in our society now place a (perhaps undue) emphasis on brevity and simplification. (One can imagine that Lincoln and Douglas would not now be allowed to expatiate as they once did.) Since complicated ideas and arguments cannot always be avoided or encapsulated, we could arrange to allow consecutive speakers to divide complex presentations (as we occasionally have done even with our 10-minute rule). I understand Bob Falvey is proposing 6 and 3 minutes. I would not favor making the times shorter than that.

(b) Our quorum requirement of 300 quite often results in a delay in starting the second or subsequent sessions of town meeting, sometimes by almost an hour (although we have not failed eventually to reach a quorum for many years). This has led to a somewhat self-defeating practice in which voters delay coming on time because they realize the start of the meeting will probably be delayed – which, of course, aggravates the problem. A number of towns have eliminated the requirement of any quorum and start at the appointed hour. Apparently this focuses the minds of voters who strive to arrive on time, perhaps fearing what mischief might be done by a small remnant. It has been my observation that we would experience fewer, and shorter, delays in starting adjourned sessions if the quorum were 200. Of course, any proposal to reduce (or eliminate) the quorum requirement would predictably encounter the objection that 300 was set by our forefathers when the population of the Town was a fraction of its present size so we should instead be increasing the quorum to represent a like percentage of registered voters, etc. Still, from the standpoint of saving voters' waiting time, a lower quorum would be sensible.

(c) My third idea would be to impose a heavy fine on citizens who leave town meeting as soon as their favorite article has been concluded. I realize that we can't do this but it is comforting to think about it.

5. The overarching challenge is to preserve and improve our open town meeting as an effective institution of participatory democracy. There are strong societal changes that make this difficult: *e.g.*, instant messaging and quick decision-making in derogation of respectful listening and thoughtful deliberation; family work-life-travel patterns that are increasingly demanding and afford less time for civic involvement; a division of labor that emphasizes hiring expertise and chasing efficiency that may make the citizen-legislator seem a rather quaint relic. To overcome these ineluctable realities we must, I believe, continue to encourage broad participation in town boards and committees – through such means as the open houses the selectmen and I have held for many years. It is a fact that most citizens - in Hingham as in other well-run towns – do not participate in town meetings most of the time. But there have been, and still are, many hundreds who usually do participate and who value and cherish their role as citizen-legislators. Maintaining their interest and participation, and increasing their number, continue to depend on well-conducted, reasonably efficient town meetings and on a widely-dispersed network of elected and appointed town boards and committees, as well as groups such as the League of Women Voters and the PTOs, all working in their own ways to make Hingham town government an open, welcoming and worthwhile endeavor.

6. I wish you well in your important work for the Town. Please let me know if I can be of further help.